

**Garbi Schmidt: *Muslim i Danmark - muslim i verden. En analyse af muslimske ungdomsforeninger og muslimsk identitet i årene op til Muhammad-krisen*. Uppsala: Swedish Science Press, Universitetsstryckeriet, 2007 – 141 s.**

The politicization of Islam has put young European Muslims between a rock and a hard place. The reality is that young native-born Muslims have to find their way on their own. There is no ready-made model for what to think about the role of faith and identity in your life if you are native-born European and Muslim. We are talking about a generational phenomenon that has to be understood as a sociological phenomenon rather than simply the importation of dodgy political ideas from abroad among a small group of maladjusted youths, which is the story we read in the newspapers.

A conservative British think tank, Policy Exchange, conducted a survey of young Muslims in 2007 and found significant inter-generational differences with the younger generation apparently embracing orthodoxy at much higher rates than their parents' generation. 37 % of British Muslims 16-24 year old preferred Islamic state schools to integrated secular schools. Only 19 % of respondents over 55 supported such schools. Half of the younger generation preferred to be governed by secular law but 37 % said, yes, they'd prefer to live under the shariah (Islamic religious law). In comparison, only 16% of the 45 and older generation said so. Astonishingly, over half of the respondents under 35 also expressed support for

polygamy.<sup>1</sup> One can argue that young European-born Muslims have no idea what religious law means in practice because they have never actually lived under it and therefore are voicing a preference for ethnic recognition rather than a serious demand for the installation of religious law. But we do not know that. What do they really mean?

It is this debate that Garbi Schmidt walks right into with her excellent study of Danish Muslim youth organizations. The definition of youth is a little hazy. Some of the named interview subjects are over thirty years old. It need not concern us because Schmidt's purpose is to understand the mental triangulation that young native-born Muslims go through to fashion a public and a private identity as Muslim and Danish. She brings an intelligent methodology and sensitivity to the project.

The book is based upon interviews with eighteen young Danish Muslims about their own ideas and feelings about the role of Islam in their lives and how they negotiate the balancing act between affirming their Muslim and Danish identities simultaneously. The interviews were bracketed between the 9/11 attacks in 2001 and the eruption of the protests against Jyllands-Posten's twelve caricatures of Muhammad. In addition, Schmidt analyzes the activities and program statements of four organizations that have either in fact or by purpose appealed to young Muslims and uses a chapter to describe Danish public debates.

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<sup>1</sup> Munira Mirza, Abi Senthilkumaran and Zein Ja'far, *Living apart together: British Muslims and the paradox of multiculturalism*, Policy Exchange, London, 2007

One might ask why it is necessary to look at the tired tirades of Karen Jespersen and the two pastors from the Danish People's Party, Jesper Langballe and Søren Krarup. The reason is, it becomes clear, that the Danish *Offentlichkeit* – Habermas' memorable concept for the crushing weight of establish opinion – describes the young Muslims' project as an impossibility. Islam cannot be made compatible with being Danish because Islam is inherently not a religion but a political project.

As it turns out some of the young people do conceptualize their project as a political one but most do not. The organizations discussed in the book are the Pakistani Muslim Youth League and Muslim Women's League, Hizb ut-Tahrir, MUNIDA (Muslimske Unge i Danmark), og Forum for Kritiske Muslimer. The four organizations are selected to cover the range of orientations and styles usually seen in Muslim associational activities. HT, as Hizb is usually called, is an international political party and is the most radical. It has been banned in Germany and France but not in Denmark and the United Kingdom. An English member, Ed Hussain, has a hilarious description in his book, *The Islamist* (2007), of how he commuted on weekends to help set up the Copenhagen branch.

The two Pakistani organizations – one for women and one for men like the Christian scouts, KFUM and KFUK – split and collapsed during the time Schmidt studied them. They were associated with a sufism-inspired mosque in Copenhagen and also connected to a transnational network of political organizations. In this case the links to a sectarian political group in Pakistan became the

groups undoing when the Danish members found their work and fund-raising disappearing into a black hole in Pakistan.

The two other organizations are in comparison "home-grown" albeit pursuing very different paths. MUNIDA started as a parent-sponsored activity for the youth associated with the Islamic Faith Community on Nørrebro in Copenhagen led by the charismatic Sheikh Ahmed Abu Laban, who died after illness in January 2007. Forum for Kritiske Muslimer explicitly aims to rethink the meaning of Islam and is dedicated to the idea that you need to read the Koran to make up your mind about what it says.

Schmidt concludes that the young Muslims are caught in wringer between asserting themselves as proudly Muslim and Danish and their desire to blend public and private identities in a hostile environment. She describes how young women self-consciously put on the hijab, the prettiest one they can find when a well-known department store obtained judicial approval for its policy of not allowing headscarf-dressed women deal with customers in the "nice" sections of the store. (What is OK in the produce section is not OK in cosmetics.)

The youth revolt is not just against a society that sends mixed messages but perhaps more importantly also an inter-generational conflict. Muslim youths growing up together with native-origin youth whose skepticism is often more about religion than about ethnicity and race find it increasingly difficult to build the bridge between social reality and the parents' ethnic and parochial Islam. The attraction to the youth organizations is ulti-

mately the hope to find friends and to have a collective journey of discovery and learning with them about what it means to be Muslims. Self-discovery is a great Western liberty. It would have been lovely to hear the parents too. “Don’t rock the boat; we have to be grateful,” you can hear them say. Maybe Schmidt will do that next?

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